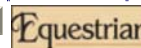




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## Beshear gets farm strategy proposals

Animal health, biofuels targeted

By Gregory A. Hall

[ghall@courier-journal.com](#)

The Courier-Journal

LEXINGTON, Ky. -- A five-year strategic plan presented yesterday to Gov. Steve Beshear by agriculture officials calls for increased efforts to better ensure animal health, bring more large-animal veterinarians to the state and promote biofuels.

No sooner than Beshear received the plan, which his predecessor Ernie Fletcher initiated last year with a task force including about 50 agricultural organizations, the governor said implementation by state government would be hampered by a tight budget. Beshear will propose his spending plan to the legislature Tuesday.



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The committee that developed the plan approved the final document last month. Agriculture officials made a formal submission to Beshear yesterday at the Kentucky Press Association convention.

"Obviously, all of it will not be accomplished in the near term," Beshear said.

The plan calls for

improved animal diagnostic centers, keeping 50 percent allocation of the state's tobacco-settlement money going to an agricultural development fund, and moving \$15.8 million in annual debt payments for water and sewer projects from the agriculture fund to the state's general budget.

Beshear did not rule out using some tobacco-settlement money that normally is directed to agricultural development to pay for other programs in his budget proposal.

"Everything's still on the table," he said, adding that he would make final decisions on the budget this weekend.

The tobacco-settlement payment for this year is estimated at \$117 million, of which half normally goes toward agricultural development, including water and sewer projects.

Beshear said he generally supports "a long-term goal" of moving the water and sewer projects to the general fund.

"The most appropriate use of these tobacco-settlement funds is just what they're supposed to be used for -- and that is (to) improve the net farm income," Beshear said. "I know that probably of necessity, at least in the minds of some legislators, they have used some of those funds for water and sewer projects just as they used some of the coal-severance tax monies in that way."

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Roger Thomas, Beshear's executive director of the Governor's Office of Agricultural Policy, said it's understood by the plan's developers that it wouldn't happen "in one fell swoop. We're asking for, when the time's appropriate, a phased-in approach."

Prior to being appointed by Beshear, Thomas said he worked on the task force as executive director of the Kentucky Dairy Development Council.

The plan also calls on Kentucky to promote biofuels, such as biodiesel and ethanol. Beshear said he could start on that proposal now.

"I'm going to be actively recruiting biofuels industries into the state, and we can do that right now and have done it to some extent in the past, and we need to increase those efforts," Beshear said.

The plan also calls on the state to establish a renewable-fuel standard for state agencies and universities. Thomas said no specific use standard is requested in the plan.

The plan also calls for legislative efforts to attract large-animal veterinarians to the state, to address a national shortage. Bills that would allow loan forgiveness to encourage veterinary students to locate practices in underserved areas and waive the sales tax on animal pharmaceuticals are before the General Assembly.

"One of the tools to do that (attract more vets) would be to remove the sales tax on pharmaceuticals," Thomas said.

Thomas and Beshear also said they are developing a relief proposal for farmers hurt by last summer's drought. A bill filed by Rep. Don Pasley, D-Winchester, calls for \$20 million of tobacco-settlement funds to go to drought relief.

Reporter Gregory A. Hall can be reached at (502) 582-4087.


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